

A SCHOOLBOY'S DIARY

And Other Stories

ROBERT WALSER

Selected and translated from the German by

DAMION SEARLS

Illustrations by

KARL WALSER

Introduction by

BEN LERNER

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LETTER FROM A POET TO A GENTLEMAN

TO YOUR letter, honored Sir, which I found on my table this evening and in which you request that I suggest a place and time where and when we might meet, I feel constrained to reply that I don't really know what to say to you. Certain misgivings arise in me since I am, you should know, someone not worth being met. I am extremely rude, with practically no manners whatsoever. To give you an opportunity to see me would mean introducing you to a person who cuts off half the rim of his felt hat with scissors to give it a wilder, more bohemian appearance. Is that the kind of strange being you really want to have before you? I was very glad to get your amiable letter. But you must have addressed it wrong. I am not the man who deserves to receive such courtesies. I ask you: Please abandon at once your desire to make my acquaintance. Civility is not welcome, as far as I am concerned, because then I would have to show the corresponding civility to you and that is just what I would prefer to avoid, since I know that well-bred behavior is not my style. Also, I don't much like to be civil; it bores me. I presume that you have a wife, that your wife is elegant, and that you host something along the lines of a salon. Anyone who makes use of expressions as fine and lovely as yours has a salon. But I am merely a man on the street, in the forests and fields, in the pub and in my own room; I would stand around like a yokel in someone's salon. I have never been to a salon in my life, I'm afraid of them, and as a man of sound mind I obviously avoid what frightens me. You are most likely a rich man who lets fall rich words. I, on the other hand, am poor, and everything I say sounds

like poverty. Either you would put me in a bad mood with what you uttered or I you with what I. You can have no idea of how honestly and sincerely I prefer and love the condition in which I live. As poor as I am, it has never once to this day occurred to me to complain—on the contrary, I value my surroundings so highly that I am constantly eagerly active in preserving them. I live in a dreary old house, a kind of ruin actually. But it makes me happy. The sight of poor people and derelict houses makes me happy, while of course I am also fully aware of how little reason you would have to understand this predilection. I need a certain quantity and amount of dilapidation, deterioration, and squalor around me, otherwise it is painful to breathe. Life would be torture to me if I were fine, elegant, and splendid. Elegance is my enemy, and I would rather try to go three days without eating than entangle myself in daring to undertake performing a bow. Honored Sir, this is said not with pride but rather with a decided sense of harmony and comfort. Why should I be what I am not, and not be what I am? That would be stupid. When I am what I am, I am content, and then everything resonates and is good all around me too. You see, it's like this: Even a new suit makes me utterly discontent and unhappy, from which I conclude that anything beautiful, fine, and new is something I hate, and anything old, used, and shabby is something I love. It's not like I love bugs; I certainly wouldn't want to eat bugs; but bugs don't bother me. In the house where I live, it is positively crawling with bugs, and still I am happy to live there. It looks like a hovel, something to clasp to one's heart. If everything in the world were new and neat and clean I would not want to live, I would kill myself. So I am afraid in a way of something when I contemplate being introduced to a distinguished, educated gentleman like yourself. I may well fear that I will only annoy you and bring you no advantage or uplift, but so too do I feel the other, equally vivid fear, namely that, to be perfectly open and frank about it, you too will annoy me and be incapable of being uplifting or agreeable to me. There is a soul in every single human condition, and you must definitely hear, and I must definitely tell you, that I value greatly what I am, however meager and lowly it may

be. I consider all envy stupid. Envy is a kind of insanity. Everyone should respect the situation in which he finds himself: It's better for everybody that way. I also fear the influence you might have over me, that is: I am afraid of the unnecessary inner work that would be required of me to ward off your influence. For that reason, I do not go running around after new friends and acquaintances—cannot, in fact, so run. To meet someone new is, at the very least, always work, and I have already permitted myself the liberty to tell you that I love comfort. What will you think of me? Whatever it is, I can't let that bother me. I insist on remaining unbothered by that. Nor do I intend to beg your forgiveness for speaking to you in this way. That would be an empty phrase. Anyone who speaks the truth is always rude. I love the stars, and the moon is my secret friend. The sky is over my head. For as long as I live, I will never unlearn looking up at it. I stand upon the earth: that is my standpoint. The hours joke around with me, and I joke around with them, and I could wish for no more delightful entertainment. Day and night are my company. I am on familiar terms with twilight and daybreak. And with that, friendly greetings from

—A POOR YOUNG POET